

Chapter 5 No.5

The following days did little to improve my luck. I still crossed paths with the twins and Fiona with frustrating regularity, but I had perfected my strategy: complete and utter indifference. I became a ghost, drifting past their teasing and pointed comments without a flicker of reaction.

"What's with the cold shoulder, little kitten?" Caius would call out in the hallway, his voice laced with mock hurt. "We helped you out, remember? A simple 'thank you' feels a bit... lacking."

Aldric's approach was quieter, more intense. He'd simply watch me, his dark eyes tracking my movements with a focus that made my skin prickle.

I never responded. I couldn't understand why they were so fixated on me. If I were a stunning beauty like Fiona, with a killer body and effortless charm, maybe I could believe they were genuinely interested.

But I was just... me. Plain. Quiet. Utterly unremarkable. The only logical conclusion was that it was a game-a challenge. They were probably unused to girls who didn't fall at their feet, and my resistance was a novelty they were determined to break.

Sometimes, though, the way they looked at me felt different. It felt like they were seeing past my carefully constructed walls, like their gaze was gently peeling back my layers and brushing against my very soul. It felt like more than just flirtation.

But I always, always shoved that thought down, convincing myself I was just imagining things, reading into something that wasn't there.

On Saturday, Betty's promised help came through. She brought me to The Starline, the restaurant where she worked.

The place was charming in a simple way, with checkered floor tiles, red booths, and the comforting smell of grilled food hanging in the air. A classic jukebox sat silent in one corner, and the overall atmosphere was warm and welcoming.

"See? It's the most popular spot in town," Betty explained, gesturing around the busy room. "That's why we need the help. And the customers are usually great. Just be friendly, maybe a little flirty, and the tips can be really good."

I gave an awkward shake of my head. "I don't know how to flirt. I'm... kind of wooden."

"You'll learn!" she said encouragingly, handing me my new uniform.

My heart sank when I saw it. It was a classic waitress dress, but the skirt was far shorter than anything I'd ever worn.

When I put it on, my legs felt exposed and strangely cold, a constant, unsettling breeze reminding me of the unfamiliarity. I was used to the safety of long jeans. A powerful urge to run surged through me, but I fought it down. This was for the money. For college. For escape. Every single penny counted.

Taking a deep breath, I walked out of the back room, ready for my first shift. And my heart immediately plummeted to my feet.

Walking through the front door, as if summoned by my worst nightmares, were the twins and Fiona.

Fiona spotted me first. Her nose wrinkled in disgust. "You have got to be kidding me. Didn't expect to run into a nuisance here. Damn it."

Another waitress, a blonde named Stacy, immediately swooped in, smiling brightly at the twins. "Aldric! Caius! Your usual booth is free."

Relief washed over me. I could avoid them.

But just as I turned to escape, Caius deftly sidestepped Stacy and caught my arm. "Actually," he said, his eyes glinting mischievously, "we'd like her to take our order."

I stared at him, my eyes wide with disbelief.

Caius looked over at his brother. "What do you think, Aldric? Should our favorite new student serve us?"

Aldric's gaze was unreadable. "Sounds like a perfect idea," he said, his voice low.

Stacy shot me a look of pure venom before storming off.

I let out a bitter smile. For crying out loud! This was not my fault!

"Well?" Aldric prompted, noticing my frozen stance. "Are you just going to stand there? Do you not want us to have lunch here?"

The threat in his tone was clear. My job was on the line. I forced a tight,

professional smile onto my face. "Sorry. What can I get for you?"

Fiona scowled. "Just a water. Looking at you kills my appetite."

Taking a deep breath, I told myself not to be bothered by her attitude. I noted it down her order and turned to the twins. They ordered two sodas and the popular double-decker burger platter to share.

When their order was ready, I carried the heavy tray over carefully, my knuckles white with tension.

My greatest fear was tripping and making a complete fool of myself in front of them. I held my breath, carefully navigating between tables, and finally managed to lower the tray onto their table with a soft thud of success. I let out a silent sigh of relief and began unloading the plates.

It was when I was handing Caius his soda that it happened. He suddenly reached out and grabbed my wrist, pulling my hand-and the glass-sharply toward him. The dark, fizzy liquid sloshed over the rim, splashing directly onto his black shirt.

I stared, dumbfounded. It had been a deliberate, calculated move.

"You clumsy idiot! Look what you've done!" Fiona shrieked, a triumphant gleam in her eyes. "I'm getting the manager. You're so fired."

Panic seized me. "No, please!" I begged, my voice shaking. "I'm so sorry! The soda... it's on the house. Please, don't."

Fiona opened her mouth to argue, but a single, icy look from Caius silenced her instantly. When he turned his gaze back to me, it had softened into its usual flirty demeanor.

"It's quite alright," he said, his tone magnanimous. "It was my fault as much as yours. I moved too suddenly." He glanced down at his shirt. "Lucky it's black, isn't it? Hardly shows. Just go and get a clean cloth and help me dry it off, and we'll call it even."

Nodding hastily, I hurried to the back and returned with a clean, dry towel. He stood up and gestured for me to follow him toward the restrooms. We stopped outside the men's room door.

I held the cloth out to him. He didn't take it. Instead, he raised an eyebrow. "Aren't you going to clean it? It was your spill, after all."

Biting back a retort, I stepped forward and began dabbing at the damp spot on his chest. The fabric of his shirt was thin, and I could feel the firm, warm muscle of his chest beneath my trembling fingers. I tried to steady

my breathing, to ignore the heat radiating from his body.

He chuckled softly, grabbing my wrist again and pulling me closer. "You can't properly clean it from way over there." His scent, that expensive, woody cologne, wrapped around me, making my head feel light and my body grow warm.

Gritting my teeth against the confusing stir of emotions inside me, I pressed the cloth more firmly against his shirt, scrubbing at the spot with a frustrated energy. The moment I was finished, I tried to step back, to flee from this overwhelming proximity.

But in a swift, shocking movement, he wrapped his arm around my waist, pulled me forcefully into the men's room, and I heard the decisive click of the lock behind us.